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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”

Statement submitted by Legião da Boa Vontade, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

Statement

The fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women offers an opportunity for the international community to improve the situation of rural women through policies that promote gender equality, reduce poverty and generate economic growth. The theme of the session invites Governments, international agencies and civil society to work together to provide a long-term solution for these global challenges. Such a solution demands quality education for girls and women, especially in rural areas, giving them the necessary tools to overcome their current situation and, at the same time, become leaders of their local community working towards sustainable development.

Today, more than half of the world's population lives in rural areas. Rural women play a significant role in the global economy and contribute to a large portion of agricultural labour in many parts of the world. Despite this fact, rural women are often overlooked and continue to be affected by poverty and hunger. Most importantly, they continue to have less access to education than their male counterparts. In an attempt to help close the gap of gender inequality in rural areas, Legião da Boa Vontade (Legion of Good Will) presents this statement, which highlights its successes in the field of women's education. Furthermore, the organization provides a model for the creation of equal opportunities for all and also for the development of long-term solutions to global crises.

Education, particularly the education of girls and women, must be the central strategy in addressing the inequality that affects rural women. This emphasis on education is one of the central tenets of the organization. As an internationally recognized social, educational and humanitarian organization, it provides accessible and quality education to all. Legião da Boa Vontade currently operates in seven countries: Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Paraguay, Portugal, the United States of America and Uruguay, and has over 62 years of experience in creating positive changes. As a result, the organization has much to contribute in discussions regarding education. In particular, it has always addressed the needs of women; in fact, women are the direct beneficiaries of nearly 85 per cent of more than 8.5 million services provided annually by the organization. Therefore, now more than ever before, a brief examination of the pedagogical practices and philosophies of the organization is needed; it will serve as an invaluable tool in helping close the global gender inequality gap.

One of the central tenets of Legião da Boa Vontade is the belief in the transformative power of education. The organization believes that quality education provides the answer to many of life's challenges. As a result, the organization provides a wide variety of educational services, including but not limited to: offering job training to the unemployed; teaching pregnant women how to prepare for motherhood; and providing educational activities that help create and foster a culture of peace for youth. The organization emphasizes this belief in quality education through its creation of numerous preschools, schools, shelters and community centres. It also provides immediate material assistance, which may help remedy global problems such as hunger or poverty. The organization conducts an annual Christmas campaign, which distributes 1,200 tons of non-perishable food baskets to over 70,000 families. It recognizes, however, that provision of material goods is a temporary solution to hunger or poverty; the permanent solution to poverty eradication is education. By providing long-term benefits for all members of a given society, education helps break the vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion.

Legião da Boa Vontade emphasizes the importance of providing girls and women with equal access to education. The hope for a universally educated world depends on the equal inclusion of girls and women in education, because women naturally transfer their education to their family members. Recognizing the positive result of this trend, the organization has created various programmes for women, particularly pregnant women. The “Baby citizen programme”, as developed by the organization, provides pregnant women from all socio-economic backgrounds with all-encompassing care. They are provided with multidisciplinary care and education as they embark on the path towards motherhood. The women receive medical and psychological care, as well as information about the physical implications of pregnancy and childbirth. Last but not least, they are assisted in developing important core values — love, solidarity and compassion — that will help them as mothers. Most importantly, they can instil these values in their children and help foster a culture of peace. After all, as the president of the organization states “World stability begins in the hearts of children”.

The emphasis placed on developing the individual’s core values is another principle of the educational philosophy of Legião da Boa Vontade, which stresses the importance of acquiring and developing values and emotional intelligence in addition to learning factual knowledge. This is exemplified in the Baby citizen programme and in every programme. The programmes offered by the organization are rooted in what the organization calls ecumenical spirituality, a philosophy best illustrated in the New Testament commandment of Jesus: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Gospel according to John, 13:34). Ecumenism, therefore, refers to the harmonious and universal relation among all human beings, regardless of religious beliefs or difference of opinion. In this philosophy of ecumenical spirituality, love is the essential instrument that enables one to channel knowledge to do good actions.

The Baby citizen programme is one of many examples of the organization’s commitment to providing a multidisciplinary education. It operates pre-primary, primary and secondary schools in various countries. These schools provide quality education free of charge and without any sort of gender bias, academic or otherwise. Furthermore, the schools combine excellent classroom education with a wide variety of services that enable students to grow as “bio-psychosocial spirit-beings”. In other words, schools operated by Legião da Boa Vontade have health professionals on staff to provide students with medical, dental and nutritional care, as well as psychologists to address the children’s learning difficulties and/or behavioural disorders. Furthermore, as part of the all-encompassing programme, the organization’s schools have social workers who can work with the families of students to overcome challenges, such as poverty and unemployment.

Legião da Boa Vontade is also renowned for its educational philosophy known as the “Pedagogy of affection and ecumenical citizen pedagogy”, developed by its president, Paiva Netto. These pedagogies are concerned with promoting an education that is capable of supplying the needs of the brain and the heart and shows us that all students can manifest their knowledge from the inside out. That is, each person has an inner potential in addition to his or her cultural background, which further enhances his or her skills and abilities. This educational practice sees the individual in its entirety, as a “bio-psychosocial spirit-being” and intends to shed more light on cultural, social and intellectual aspects of knowledge, by giving room to universal values and ecumenical spirituality.

This educational philosophy has enjoyed tremendous success in the schools run by Legião da Boa Vontade. Despite the fact that the organization's schools often operate in areas marred by violence, there are no instances of student violence. This is because the organization has successfully instilled the value of feeling and expressing fraternal love, solidarity and compassion in its students. Most importantly, the students carry these values throughout their entire lives. These pedagogies have, therefore, helped thousands to overcome difficult situations, including but not limited to: domestic abuse, unemployment, poverty and depression. Furthermore, the schools develop students' intellect. As a result, the organization's schools create productive and compassionate members of society. The success of the pedagogies is documented by the fact that many former students return to the organization as caregivers and professional resources.

In addition to schools, the "Pedagogy of affection and ecumenical citizen pedagogy" is also practised at shelters and community centres run by Legião da Boa Vontade. It is utilized with more functional education, such as job training seminars and language classes. These classes target the needs of those, particularly women, who seek a multidisciplinary education that contains both practical and philosophical teachings. This exemplifies the organization's commitment to providing an all-encompassing education that supplies individuals with the tools necessary to nurture and sustain their spiritual, psychological, intellectual and emotional needs.

The experiences and the successes of Legião da Boa Vontade are directly relevant to the problems addressed by the current session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Education must be the central part of any strategy that the international community chooses to pursue, because it is only through education that girls and women in rural areas can become empowered. In addition, providing access to education for girls and women is the key to hunger and poverty eradication. Education will not only help families break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion, it will also enrich the community with long-term benefits. The experience and successes of the organization have shown, however, that a wider definition of education is needed. There is a need for a new type of education, a curriculum that targets both the brain and the heart, an education that is capable of developing the child's intellect while instilling and nurturing core values within the child. This education should be available to all, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, economic background or any other criteria. This is important because women and girls, and their male counterparts, should have equal access to education and financial, physical and social assets. After all, women are the natural educators of the family, they have always been and will continue to be the agents of educational dissemination.

The organization's pedagogies demonstrate the transformative power of quality education in the lives of girls and women in addition to the betterment of their local community. This achievement is made possible thanks to the multidimensional approach practised by the organization's various social and educational programmes. From this experience, the organization recommends a broader discussion on fostering an all-encompassing educational system that embraces the development of the person as a whole. In the words of the president of Legião da Boa Vontade "take care of the spirit, reform the human being and everything will transform itself".